



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Democratic Elections; Follow-up to Elections SHDM

Delivered by Mr. Gavin Helf, Public Member, U.S. Delegation
Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
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The United States congratulates the ODIHR for convening an outstanding Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on Elections this past July in Vienna. The two-day event examined many of the issues and controversies surrounding our shared OSCE commitments regarding elections, particularly those arising from the Copenhagen Document. The near-consensus reflected in the closing statements by the Russian Federation and the United States was that these existing commitments provide the basic guidelines and benchmarks that we need to achieve democratic elections. While there was little support for reopening the Copenhagen commitments for debate, there was general support for strengthening the Copenhagen commitments by filling some gaps that have developed since 1990. For example, the United States would welcome the development of supplementary commitments to deal with new technologies in voting, as well as their impact on election observation. Additionally, any exercise to identify possible gaps in these commitments should consider the plight of internally displaced persons (IDPs), who are frequently disenfranchised within their own countries. We also would welcome supplementary commitments that would enhance transparency and accountability.

Participants in the SHDM in Vienna emphasized the importance of follow-up to election observation missions. The frequent lack of meaningful responses to ODIHR recommendations by a number of participating States, which can usually be attributed to an absence of political will on the part of high-level government officials, is troubling. ODIHR assessment and election observation reports and related recommendations are based on commitments undertaken by all participating States and are designed to assist those States in improving their election systems. As several participating States pointed out at the Permanent Council on September 29, ODIHR's mandate includes providing such assistance. However, in order for this assistance to achieve results, participating States must respond constructively, not defensively, to ODIHR's recommendations. We are ready to discuss the concerns raised in the Permanent Council seriously, but we respectfully disagree that extensive new commitments are needed or that ODIHR's election observation missions are biased.

The existing Copenhagen commitments, when implemented, provide the guidelines and benchmarks that we need to achieve democratic, free and fair elections. There are many different electoral systems in place in the OSCE region, and there are many legitimate ways to carry out elections. Different systems can all be equally valid, as long as they provide the framework for a free, fair and truly democratic electoral process. Therefore, there is little to be gained from a time-consuming comparison of electoral systems. On the contrary, conducting such a comparison or re-opening the Copenhagen Document would distract ODIHR from critical tasks and waste its valuable time and resources.

The United States wishes to congratulate Bosnia-Herzegovina on the running of its municipal elections last Saturday. Those elections were a major step forward for democracy in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Citizens for the first time directly elected their mayors, increasing officials' accountability to their constituents. The elections, which were organized by local election committees for the first time without international help, ran smoothly.

A number of other elections since our last meeting have been less positive, however.

Azerbaijan held a presidential election in October and Georgia held parliamentary elections in November 2003. Both elections failed to meet OSCE standards. In Azerbaijan, police clashed violently with opposition backers frustrated by the latest in a long series of questionable elections. Many were hurt and hundreds arrested.

In Georgia, by contrast, a united opposition bloc rallied a popular movement to protest the results of a falsified election. We are happy to note that January's presidential election in Georgia and the parliamentary election in March marked significant progress.

Unfortunately, Russia's December 2003 parliamentary elections and presidential election held this past March failed to meet OSCE standards. As President Bush recently stated, we stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Russia in fighting terrorism. But we are also concerned about decisions that could undermine democracy in Russia. As governments fight the enemies of democracy, they must uphold the principles of democracy.

Some aspects of Kazakhstan's parliamentary elections in September demonstrated progress: for example, twelve opposition parties were registered to participate and transparent ballot boxes were introduced. Unfortunately, however, the OSCE observation mission concluded that the election fell short of OSCE commitments in many respects, particularly in the impartial implementation of election legislation. Similar problems also emerged during yesterday's second-round. We urge the Central Election Commission to swiftly and transparently address allegations of election violations.

The pre-election environment in Ukraine has already been decidedly problematic and is of great concern to the United States. Problems include increasing control and manipulation of the media and attempts by national authorities to limit access to international broadcasting, including Radio Liberty. We are also concerned about the imposition of serious obstacles to free assembly and the ability to conduct a free and fair political campaign. The Government of Ukraine has increased pressure and harassment, including violence, against the opposition. The possibility of a free and fair election already has been seriously compromised. We call yet again upon the Ukrainian government to abide by Ukraine's OSCE commitments.

Belarus has had numerous opportunities to implement its OSCE commitments in preparation for the October parliamentary elections. Regrettably, the authorities in Minsk have shown no interest in improving Belarus' dismal election record. The government crackdown on political and media freedoms, the lack of transparency in Belarusian election procedures and a lack of electoral reforms provides a poor environment for free and fair elections. The United States urges the Belarusian

government to heed the concerns of the participating States and abide by the four benchmarks for free and fair elections for Belarus set by the OSCE more than four years ago. We have grave concerns about both the parliamentary elections and the simultaneous referendum on presidential succession, and we will be watching the government's conduct of these polls closely.

In Uzbekistan, parliamentary elections are scheduled for December. Unfortunately, no opposition parties will be participating, as Tashkent has consistently denied their applications for registration. We remain hopeful, however, that opposition candidates will be able to compete as part of citizen initiative groups.

In anticipation of general elections to be held in Albania in 2005, many of the shortcomings identified by OSCE/ODIHR following the 2003 local government elections have not been addressed. Implementation by the Government and political parties must begin soon in order to create the environment necessary for those elections to fully comply with OSCE standards and be conducted in a transparent manner throughout the entire country. Of particular concern are voter lists that will be used for those elections. The United States echoes the call for all Albanian politicians to take seriously their shared responsibility to properly prepare and conduct these elections. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, too, will hold important elections next year. We hope that leaders of both countries will choose to conduct their elections in a manner consistent with their OSCE commitments. We urge both participating States to continue implementing needed reforms in order to ensure that their elections are competitive and democratic.

In accordance with our OSCE commitments, the United States invited the OSCE to observe its November 2 election. The United States welcomes the Needs Assessment Mission and related work undertaken by ODIHR in advance of the elections, and commends the OSCE for its consistent balanced approach to election monitoring. The United States is cooperating with ODIHR because we recognize that participating States bear the primary responsibility for fulfilling their election-related commitments. This is important for two reasons. First, making and reinforcing commitments on paper is an empty exercise unless participating States truly desire and intend to hold free, fair and democratic elections. Secondly, governments cannot expect to create public confidence in elections unless governments demonstrate this desire and intent to their citizens. We encourage other states to recognize these principles too.